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ABSTRACT

Humanities can be simplistically defined as a program, as a set of related or unrelated activities, or as human and humane interaction. The following assumptions are important in establishing humanities programs in the elementary school: programs must be reality oriented; there should be an emphasis on direct participation for the student; teaching should be value directed; the atmosphere of the place where children work should be interesting and inviting; evaluation of learning should be from a different perspective; and the child's self-perception should be emphasized in such programs. The translation of these assumptions about the humanities into practice requires that thought be given to the particular humanizing responsibilities and functions appropriate to the schools of today for the responsible human behavior needed in the twenty-first century. (LL)

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HUMANITIES IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Albert M. DeSousa

The past few years have given witness to the decline in attention to most everything in education except salaries and cost. Even within professional ranks it has not been popular to re-examine the value and role of the humanities in the curriculum. For some strange reason, it has been almost unheard of to examine the role of the humanities in the elementary school.

During the 1965 Conference sponsored by the Commission of ASCD on Current Curriculum Development, only Berman's paper concerned itself with the most humanized of all educational institutions, the elementary school. Each opportunity for such an examination, however, represents a potential, a hope for a new start, the resurgence of that viable force which focuses on children as people and as learners.

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The definition of the humanities is crucial to any discussion of the topic. It can be simplistically defined as a program; as a set of related or unrelated activities; or as human and humane interaction. The definition and development of term will indicate the process and outcome desired by any of these definitions. Several posits and or assumptions must be established, supported and/or rejected. For example:

Most schools are not currently organized as humane institutions. Schools are pass-fail, or A,B,C,D,E oriented. Schools are concerned about exams, stanines, behavioral objectives and State or National testing programs, rather than concerning themselves about what a student has learned and what he needs to learn. Internal structures, mythical or real, demand a percentage of failure; detentions after school, red marks on papers, and negative letters to the home that neither promote learning nor present the school as a place filled with warmth, mutual respect, and confidence.

Second: Elementary schools are not an exception to the first premise.

Third: Most schools tend to emphasize product. Questions such as: how many, what, who, or when, rather than process questions of why and how does it work.

Fourth: Organizational patterns such as time blocks, grade levels and separate approaches to subject matter do not enhance personalized learning, nor is it possible for a program to be truly humane if it is offered to a select few.

Fifth: Lip service is easier to dole out and cheaper than is dedication to a profession, love for teaching and for learning, and respect for the individual with his or her peculiar needs and human rights.

If these assumptions about schools are added to certain assumptions about teachers, namely: that human behavior is ingrained and unchangeable; that teaching follows the pattern and the experience by which teachers were taught; that teachers simply do not care about affective learning; that the humanities is nice for faculty meeting discussion but little else, there is no point in developing a concern or engaging in its expression.

We are concerned, however, with the state of the humanities as the vital and viable force that seems to defy the simplicity of the three primary definitions given to it; yet, it is pervasive among them all. Fundamentally, we reject the posits about schools and teachers or we would not be here.

Basic, then, to the entire educational process and the purpose of this conference is the analyses of these definitions and assumptions and the development of human concern and involvement.

Humanities within the schools, based on the name given to these patterns by Cicero and Quintilian, relates to philosophies of life and learning which distinguish man from animal and the

incumbent values and uses to which this definition lends itself. It moves from what Aulus Gellius defined as "education and training in the good arts," to the adaptation of formal training which serve as guides to contemporary action and wisdom, to human ideals and utilities. Because the goals of these actions are indefinite and capable of an infinite variety of statement and degree of realization, so long as men and women continue to seek an expression of communication, of art, and science, and history, both method and art will remain strong.

The extensive literature of defense of the humanities clearly defines the ideals which the humanities are to serve, but, like the apologists of the nineteenth century, are unclear about the means to accomplish their end. Within this classical framework, these same questions arise and are answered even today.

What is the nature of man?

He is thinking.

He is social.

He is emotional.

He is spiritual.

Then, what are we doing to man?

What do we do when we say we teach?

What do we mean when we say we teach the humanities?

When and why the surge for the humanities in the schools?

Usually, following a movement which emphasizes intellectual - scientific - knowledge, man seeks answers to those questions relating to person and time. The fragments of scientific knowledge are unsatisfying to humankind until they are related to the emotive nature that sees in bits and fragments broad generalizations. These generalizations govern human relationships and are expressed in the quests and questions raised through art, music, literature, and dance, as well as the continued pursuit of the ennobling sciences. These generalizations are not the specific avenues or roadways, subjects or courses of study, textbooks or computors; they serve to give direction and meaning to the use of knowledge.

Human experience has been recorded in a myriad of times, and places, and forms. Human thought and feeling know no bounds save that of human creativity. Thusly, definition is reflective of a concept of the humanities - the arts and sciences of the past and their manifestations in the present. The arts serve ends beyond themselves - ends that are moral in nature and public in practice - whereby man becomes more humanized and with the sciences develop the precise theoretical structures that deal with human accomplishment.

"Man is never so human as when his complexity defies the description of the most astute observer." (Berman, 1967.) Yet, the same basic questions regarding these observations are constantly raised in the schools and in society in general.

What is the nature of man?

What are the objectives of the society in which schools exist?

What do we mean when we say we teach?

Who is the educated man?

Can the humanities be taught? What are the characteristics that distinguish this experience from others.

What are the tolerences and understandings created through experiences that are intangible?

How do you change behavior - of the child and of his teacher?

It is not the objective of this presentation to detail with an ontological or epistomological analysis the nature of the humanities. So much of that has already been pursued. It is my intent to consider the question: "What are the salient characteristics of the humanities as a continuing experience in the elementary school?"

In the past, attempts at teaching the humanities have demonstrated certain common observable elements which can be applied to the present. By definition, be it program, related or unrelated activity, or human interaction, the following characteristics seem to me significant in my definition to be applied to the elementary school.

First, such programs have held to common themes necessitating multi-disciplinary approaches rather than content or separate discipline approaches as the pattern of organization.

Second, Humanities Programs are reality oriented - reality places the child in the position where he sees the relationships between the content he studies and the world in which he lives. Further, it develops an attitude toward learning, toward guessing, probabilities, and the possibility of solving problems - of school and life.

Third, Humanities Programs emphasize direct participation - direct participation says to the child, "I can manipulate this knowledge in relation to my needs, my past experience and can generalize based on this new discovery of relations and similarities between ideas with a resulting sense of self-confidence in newly found abilities.

Fourth, Discovery, the heuristic principle -- Through responsible participation in learning, the child says, "I find a relationship between my experience, my actions, the way in which I learn and the manner in which I relate to people and they relate to me. My environment is controlled by me; I am not controlled by it."

Fifth, Humanities teaching is value directed. Education as Robert Hutchins has defined it, is education about values, or it is nothing. Opening the minds of young people to alternate value systems of different cultures, of different peoples, does not tell them what to think. It should establish enough confidence in their ultimate judgment; it should engage both hearts and minds to make them worthy citizens in a living democracy.

Sixth, Humanities teaching is based on openness and acceptance of the child and his responses. Learning is the opportunity for the child to see his level of understanding as the basis on which he can grow.

Seventh, there is an atmosphere in which humanities programs flourish. The appearance of the place where children work, the classroom, must be interesting, inviting, and as a part of them, cause them to cherish the school which is theirs. It is a place where children want to read and to write and to compute because the teacher cares and provides the opportunities for that caring to become a way of life.

Eighth, Humanities education involves evaluation from a different perspective. Evaluation is an intrinsic ingredient in learning. Evaluation is not the seeking of a label to pin on a child or some euphemism for failure. Humanities evaluation focuses primarily on self-evaluation. It should engage the child in attempting to formulate an impression of himself relative to others and everything that he does. He must ask, "Am I succeeding?" The teacher's self-evaluation should focus on similar questions.

Ninth, Humanities programs focus on the child's self-perception. Self-concept is a learned mechanism built primarily as a mirrored reflection of the image held by others surrounding that self. Identity is the answer to the question: "Who am I? How am I alike and different from other people?"

The image of success in creating that identity is found in the reaction of significant persons to the role the child plays as being valued and valuable, as well as of his good and his goodness.

The development of a personal system of standards becomes a modus operandi for the creation of values and feelings. This system generates the rules that are followed in primary and ordinal relationships.

The school, through the teachers who truly represent it, plays a significant role as model, even paragon, in reinforcing the values, securities, or lack of values and insecurities formulated. Impersonalization is often the by-product of technology; it is always the death knoll of education. Personalization is the core of the human adventure. Trust, which is more than hearts and flowers, is responsibility for actions, is the basis for communication, is the extension of a belief in self toward a belief in the world.

If we were to apply these characteristics to the humanities program we have in mind, what would we discover about the why's and wherefore's of a humanized elementary school? Possibly, as Whitehead suggested that stage of romance which allows for the gathering of braod and joyful experience. The translation of these assumptions about the humanities into practice requires that thought be given to the particular humanizing responsibilities and functions appropriate to the schools of today for the responsible human behavior needed in the twenty-first century.